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# THE BIBLICAL WORLD

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## *Editorial*

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### HAVE WE A MESSAGE FOR THE HOUR?

Questions of social ethics are to the front today as scarcely ever before in the history of Christianity. Newspapers and magazines are filled with articles exposing the iniquity of our municipal politics, denouncing the financial methods of the stock market and of the great business corporations, setting forth the statistics of crime and pauperism. When all just deduction has been made for exaggeration, hasty judgment, and malice, the facts that remain are saddening to every man who loves his fellow-men and believes in righteousness. That we may not become pessimistic, it is well to remember that this many-voiced cry of protest is an evidence, not only of the existence of social unrighteousness, but also of a public conscience which protests against evil and demands the correction of it, and that in some cases the evil itself is old, the protest only is new.

Yet, old or new, the evils are real and grievous; and earnest-minded men can but ask: What can be done to bring them to an end, to establish peace in place of war, honesty in place of fraud, justice and service to others in place of greed, self-control in the place of intemperance and lust? Especially must the student of the Bible and the Christian preacher ask themselves: Has the Bible a message for this day? Has the gospel power to heal the ills which afflict society in this age? And, if so, how can we bring this message and this power to bear effectively upon the conditions that alarm us and cry out for a remedy?

It is well for us that we ask ourselves these questions and seek

earnestly for the answer. To bring the gospel to men one by one, and lift them to the average moral level of the church, is a great work, the value of which we would not for a moment belittle. But to clarify the moral vision of men and quicken their consciences to see the evil to which before they were blind, to set for men within and without the church a higher than the conventional moral standard, to rouse and intelligently to direct a moral sentiment that shall in the end deal a death-blow to evils centuries old, and lift the whole church to a higher plane of conduct in some important phase of life—these are greater tasks, and not less important than the saving of individual men. For, in fact, it is precisely by low moral standards in the church and out of it, precisely by the continuance, often unrebuked, of iniquity in political, commercial, and social life, that men and women are being degraded, hindered in their moral development, repelled from the acceptance of the truth of Christianity.

What, then, can the Bible student and Christian preacher do? Three things, if he have the ability, the courage, the patience.

First, he may master the ethical principles of the New Testament. It is safe to say that this is still for many a Christian preacher a task far from accomplishment. But to have achieved it is, if not indispensable to large and effective work in the sphere of which we are speaking, yet of the highest value in this direction. Great evils are not cured by snap-judgment denunciation. The educational and reconstructive work that must be done, if a real advance is to be made, calls for something broader and deeper than a feeling that stock-gambling is wrong, that family life is being destroyed by the divorce evil, that employers are oppressing their employees, that employees are lacking in conscience. It demands men whose ethical thinking has reached fundamental moral principles, and who build on these all their specific teachings respecting the duties of men to men. It is well to advise preachers of the gospel not to meddle with matters that they do not understand; but it is better to remind them that they ought to understand the fundamental principles of Christian ethics.

Secondly, the Bible student and Christian preacher who has mastered the principles of Christian ethics for himself may impart them to those who are under his instruction, teaching them what

these principles are, that they are applicable to all the spheres of human life, and that it is the task of Christian men and women more and more completely to bring all human institutions under the domination of them. To lodge these principles in the minds of the young, to impress upon them early the truth that life is to be lived in accordance with these principles, is to work effectively, even if slowly, for the ultimate Christianizing of society, as yet fully half pagan.

But, in the third place, some Christian teachers, to say the least, ought to be studying existing conditions and problems either at first hand or in trustworthy published reports. By such study, patiently continued, they may come to a judgment, not only confident, but well grounded, that certain practices common in business or social life are contrary to the principles of the gospel, unrighteous, and harmful. When such convictions have been reached by intelligent and conscientious study, it is not only the privilege but the duty of the Christian teacher to utter them, undismayed by criticism, unrestrained by denunciation. The Old Testament prophets have much to teach us in this matter. There is need again of Elijahs and Isaiahs and Malachis to apply the unchanging ethical principles to the unrighteous conduct of men, and, hewing to the line, to declare with unmistakable clearness the word of the Lord to this generation. Fools no doubt will rush in where angels fear to tread. But better the risk of this than that there shall be no men of vision and insight, and no voice to point out the way of righteousness to a perplexed or a sinful people. Let not the preacher of righteousness weaken the force of his moral message by rash and ill-considered denunciation of real or fancied wrong, or by assuming the functions of courts and investigating committees. Let the novice in ethical principles and their application to the complicated conditions of modern life hold his peace till insight has succeeded to ignorance. But may heaven grant to us some men who have laid firm hold upon the fundamental principles of Christian ethics, and who have with patience and insight learned enough of the world as it is today to be able intelligently to apply these principles to existing problems. And when such men arise, let them speak their message with all the courage of an Elijah or a John the Baptist.

These things, we say, there is urgent need that some men, even

many men, do. But there is a fourth task, most important of all, and most practicable of all, in which every Christian, preacher or teacher or layman, ought to have a part: he ought to make goodness contagious. By our conduct every one of us ought to be contributing to the permeation of society with an enthusiasm for justice and righteousness and goodness. It is the business of the leaven to leaven the whole lump. It was not by volumes on ethics, theoretical or practical, nor by essays on the labor problem, nor by serving as arbiter between disputants, that Jesus accomplished his revolutionary work for the ethical life of the world. A few comprehensive statements of ethical truth have come down to us—enough to give us the clue to the unity of his ethical thought. But the dynamic of his teaching was in his pregnant, ringing, stinging commands and reproofs, not too carefully pruned of hyperbole or guarded against paradox; and, above all, in a life wholly devoted to the welfare of men, and carrying its devotion even to death. Few of us can write books. Still fewer of us could settle a strike even if we had the opportunity. Those who can do these things ought to do them. But it is a greater thing to furnish to society the leaven of right and noble conduct; and fortunately this greater thing is within the reach of all of us. The world responds slowly to academic treatises and abstract moral ideals. But it yields with surprising promptness to the contagion of personal conduct. If the Christians of today, or any considerable number of them, should make it evident that they not only believe the teachings of Jesus to be morally true, but that they have also surrendered personally to Jesus as their Lord and Master in all their activities, and that in this surrender they have discovered a life which gives unbounded enthusiasm and power in all good things, the world would inquire eagerly into the meaning and source of such enthusiasm and power. Herein is the opportunity and the duty which confront each one of us at this hour.

What shall be the fruitage a generation hence of the influence we are exerting today, of the work we do and the life we live in 1906? Shall it be greed and unprincipled selfishness, social strife and bitterness, or peace, wrought through love and co-operation for the highest welfare of men?